

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers

College of Art

Spring 5-15-2020

Unraveling Memory through Childhood Relics

Franchesca Rousseas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rousseas, Franchesca, "Unraveling Memory through Childhood Relics" (2020). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 77.

<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/77>

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

Unraveling Memory through Childhood Relics

Franchesca Rousseas

Washington University in St. Louis

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

BFA in Studio Art

1 May 2020

Abstract

The formation of memory is a universal experience that occurs at an individual level. Memory is intangible and abstract, but it can be tied to physical objects such as photographs. These objects may remain the same throughout the course of our lives, but our memories are subject to change. Information is inevitably lost or altered over time, as our minds are more pliable than they are rigid. These alterations result in the desire to reconstruct and reinterpret past events given the information that is still accessible. Focusing on objects of domesticity that trigger childhood memories, I reveal how the act of remembering is a complicated experience, as humans struggle between objective truths and fabricated truths. By repurposing photographs and objects using paint, I further complicate the original and echo the process of recalling memory.

Precedent

Moving out of my childhood home is an event that I think about often. My family was very reluctant to leave, and my mom constantly said she did not want to leave behind all the memories we created there as a family - as if these memories were physically attached to our house, and could not exist beyond its walls. The last time I was inside the house, it was completely empty. I remember walking through each room before leaving, taking a mental snapshot of every crevice. I wanted to remember the creaky floorboard in my brother's room, the shard-like handle that opened the mirror in my bathroom, and the beaded curtain that led to the crawl-space in my basement. It frightened me to think that I may one day forget all of these small details that held so many memories.

The house that my parents and I moved into is much smaller. All of the furniture and things that once were spread out in my former home were now crammed into the new space. My parents covered the home in photographs to the point where there was barely any blank wall space left. Some photos were framed on the wall, others tucked into the corners of mirrors, and some even propped up against cans of soup in the pantry. I found it strange to see the interior of my old home, and all of these past memories in the new space; it is an overwhelming reminder of the past.

Part 1 - Painting in relation to Photography

I have always considered myself a painter, though I have a long-standing relationship with photographs and often use them as reference for my work. I feel potential in photos: kinetic energy waiting to burst out of an image and manifest itself in a new form, painting. Painting brings the still image to life. I find it difficult to experience the full life cycle of a memory in a single image, because an image acts as a prompt, not an entire visual history¹. Roland Barthes, author of *Camera Lucida*, describes the difference between these two mediums, contrasting the instantaneous nature of photography with the soft and lengthy quality of painting². By painting photographs, I soften the abrupt nature of photography, and memorialize the instantaneous moment. In a way, my paintings unravel the mystery behind the snapshot and allow for a deeper reading into the triggered memory.

I believe that painting can allow for an in-depth experience, due to the nature of the medium. There are fewer limitations in creating a painting than there are in taking a photograph. Painting is a lengthy process where there is room to make edits, to cover mistakes, to introduce new elements, and to alter existing things. In a way painting can provide more access into what the photograph begins to do in terms of memory; it is an expanded version of photography.

When I look through childhood photographs and memorabilia as inspiration for my work, an inexplicable feeling arises. I experienced this sensation when looking at Robert Bechtle's '61 *Pontiac* (Fig. 1) for the first time - a sense of warmth and longing for a time that I never lived in. As a photo-realistic painter, Bechtle gained popularity for his incredibly life-like and

¹Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Verso, 2002, 396

² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2010, 11

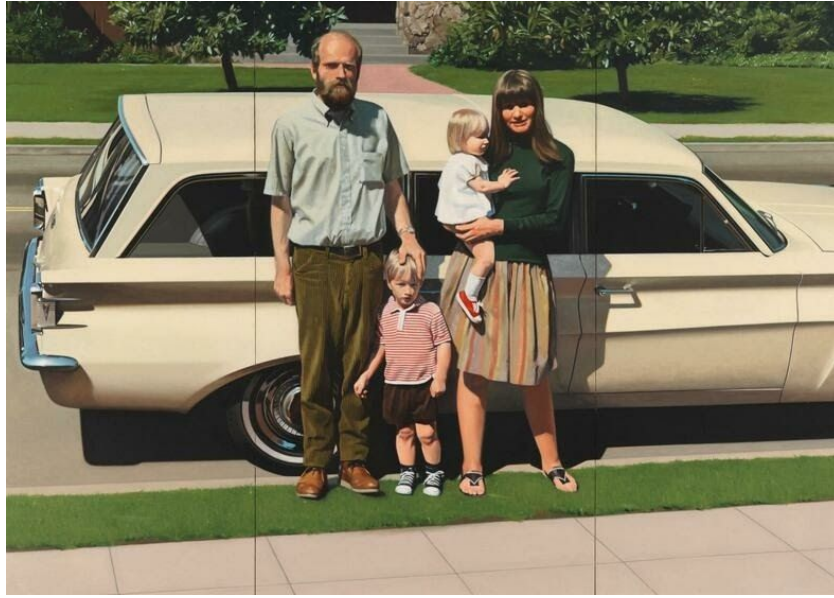


Figure 1. '61 Pontiac, Robert Bechtle, 1968 - 1969, 59 4/5 × 84 3/10 in, Oil On Canvas

candid portrayals of San Francisco in the 1960s. He often painted cars, street-scenes, and people with their cars by projecting photographs onto large-scale canvases and then painting on top of the projection³. '61 Pontiac depicts a woman and a man with their two children in front of the family's car. It is obvious that '61 Pontiac is a painting made from a photograph, as some of the subjects' faces suggest an apprehension to their picture being taken by the unseen photographer.

Bechtle's paintings of photographs resonated with me in a way that I initially struggled to comprehend. Walter Benjamin describes this pull as an object's *aura*⁴: something we cannot touch physically, but can feel internally. There is such a strong human presence in Bechtle's paintings, even though he does not paint from life, but from a documentation of life. His translation across different mediums (life, photography, painting) raises questions regarding the

³ SFMOMA. *Robert Bechtle: The camera is a sketchbook*.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," In *Illuminations: Essays Reflections* New York: Schocken Books, 1996

relationship between the original and the reproduction. According to Benjamin, we pay attention to the original more in the presence of a reproduction⁵. Bechtle's work activates our attention in this same way. His paintings are interesting in their own right, but they also create interest in the original: the photographs which remain hidden from the public. We begin to wonder about these unseen photographs, and imagine what was happening when Bechtle took them. There are many dualities in Bechtle's paintings - between photo and paint, original and reproduction, tangible and intangible, etc. The presence of these dualities in his work contribute to the overall aura, which is one of the reasons why I am drawn to his work.

Part 2 - Memory Life Cycle

My interest in family and childhood photographs force me to think about recalled memories, and how the painted medium can reflect this retrieval process⁶. This process of recall alters the original memory, resulting in a reproduction of the original. My painted reproductions offer different versions of the "truth".

Memory is potent, yet abstract. As described by Siegfried Kracauer, "[...] *Memory* encompasses neither the entire spatial appearance of a state of affairs nor its entire temporal course. Compared to photography, memory's records are full of gaps."⁷ Because the preservation

⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, 254

⁶ Bäuml and Samenieh, "The Two Faces of Memory Retrieval," 794

⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, "Memory Images (1927)," In *Memory*, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012, 45

of memory relies on malleable mediums, such as people, memory can never be accessed with the same amount of clarity as when the event first occurred. Unlike the documentary nature of photography, our minds are unreliable sources, only granting partial access into past events.



Figure 2. *At Home* , 2020, [2] 16 x 20 in, oil on canvas

My series *At Home* (Fig. 2) is an attempt to recreate spaces from my childhood home that I once remembered with such clarity, but now can only imperfectly piece together. I paint the spaces according to what I remember of the house, relying on my memory and some photographic evidence. I reveal certain information, such as a rug, shelves, and a TV, and conceal the remaining information, or interior through exposed underpaintings and deliberate cropping. There begins to be a sense of believable perspective by the way the furniture is arranged, but it quickly loses credibility by the lack of structure and perspective in the flattened background. The combination of additive and subtractive painting techniques describe the hazy and fragmented process of recalling memory. Just as memory is selective in what it allows us to remember, I am selective in what I paint and what I leave unfinished.

Family archival photographs, which serve as inspiration for my work, are a multi-perspectival medium and raise questions surrounding truth. Being that family archives involve more than one person, there is room for multiple and sometimes conflicting opinions to arise. Anette Kuhn, author of *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* investigates the complicated link between objective truth and subjective interpretation of memory, triggered by photographs. She writes, “The photograph is a prop, a prompt, a pre-text: it sets the scene for recollection.”⁸ A single photograph takes the form of a symbol, allowing anyone to make their own inferences about the context in which the photo was taken. She poses the question, “whose memory is to prevail in the family archive?”⁹ The truth of an event becomes clouded over time not only through the deterioration of memory but also through overlapping perspectives, making it difficult to distinguish between truth and fabrication.

As I sifted through bins full of my own family photographs, I wondered how still images could ignite such an intimate, lively, and conflicting experience. I became intrigued by the countless number of childhood photos taken by relatives which seemed to depict nothing: many images captured myself and my family members engaging in boring activities such as opening a cabinet or eating breakfast. I viewed these photographs with a lack of interest, yet I also thought of them fondly¹⁰. *Hide and Seek* (Fig. 3) depict a headless torso and a pair of legs floating within a space of solid color. By manipulating the original image through paint, the emphasis does not lie upon the associated memory, but on what is visible and invisible.

⁸ Anette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 396

⁹ Ibid, 397

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 16 “Yet, among those which had been selected, evaluated, approved, collected in albums or magazines and which had thereby passed through the filter of culture, I realized that some provoked tiny jublations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself ... and that others, on the contrary, were so indifferent to me ...”



Figure 3. *Hide and Seek*, 2018, [2] 16 x 20 in, Oil on Canvas Pad

By eliminating crucial information there becomes a need to fill in the gaps or the “missing elements”. I do not seek out visually striking photographs; I find that candid and ordinary portrayals hold much more depth, complexity, and history. Through my translation from photo to painting, I omit certain information such as the head and upper body. Because the human body is a recognizable form, there is an expectation for the painted body to be complete, to include a head and torso. According to the closure principle within the Gestalt Principles of Grouping, people tend to perceive incomplete patterns as being complete¹¹. *Hide and Seek* plays on these rules of perception and expectations as a way to draw comparisons between the original photograph and my painted reproduction of it, and to visualize the complicated life cycle a memory undergoes.

¹¹ The Interaction Design Foundation, “What Are Gestalt Principles?”

Part 3 - Familiarity / Unfamiliarity

Most of the references I use for my paintings are mundane and domestic objects, things people come in contact with regularly. We become immune to the specialness of these things, because they blend into our daily routines¹². For me, some of these things are the photo album collecting dust on the shelf above my laundry machine, and the ceramic dog I made as a child sitting in my kitchen. These dated, maybe even obsolete, objects are so precious and sentimental, yet we do not interact with them unless purposefully confronted by them. Author Hal Foster describes how the surrealists' fascination with the "outmoded"¹³ or dated material fueled their creative endeavors. He discusses, "The surrealist concern with the marvelous and the uncanny, [...] the return of familiar images made strange by repression."¹⁴ Surrealism takes inspiration from ordinary, outdated objects and re-activate them through slight distortion. Take Dali's melting clocks for example - I am so intrigued by this painting because I know how clocks function, and I would never expect to see a rigid clock behaving as a loose, slimy material. This fascination brings to mind the *pique technique*, which describes how people are more likely to pay attention to something familiar when placed in an unexpected context¹⁵. Abiding by the laws of perception and the surrealist style, I seek to hook curiosity with the familiar and reel it in with the unexpectedness of the surrounding environment.

¹² Zajonc, R. B. "Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10, no. 6 (2001)

¹³ Hal Foster, "Outmoded Spaces (1993)," In *Memory*, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012, 52

¹⁴ Ibid, 52

¹⁵ Burger et al., "The Pique Technique: Overcoming Mindlessness or Shifting Heuristics?" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 37, no. 9 (September 2007)



Figure 4. *Trigger*, 2020, 29" x 36", Oil on Canvas



Figure 5. Detail of *Trigger*

An example of this marriage of surrealist thinking and the familiar can be seen in my work titled *Trigger*. In my painting, objects from my home are painted to scale in a still-life arrangement slightly off center of the canvas. I consider these objects triggers, as they prompt me to remember specific childhood memories. The striped fabric background is painted without a reference, and is therefore a fabrication of memory. As a way to separate these two spaces from one another, I have created a subtly illogical sense of space: the objects do not sit on the fabric as one would expect, rather the drop-shadows create an alternate plane of space. The differences in surface texture also help to separate the spaces both physically and conceptually. I used a palette knife to paint the *memory space* as the tool does not allow for the same amount of clarity and precision that a paintbrush does; this process echoes my inability to paint the fabric truthfully. I used a paintbrush for the *still life space* as I had actual references to work from, and did not need to rely on my memory while painting.

Benjamin writes, “[...] a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability”¹⁶. It is the transfer from three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional painting that activates the original and brings to mind certain memories. *Trigger* is not so much about the ethereal, and temporal quality of memory, rather it places the familiar within an unfamiliar context. The way I arrange space on the canvas emphasizes these often overlooked objects’ ability to trigger memory.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 254

Part 4 - Records of Memory

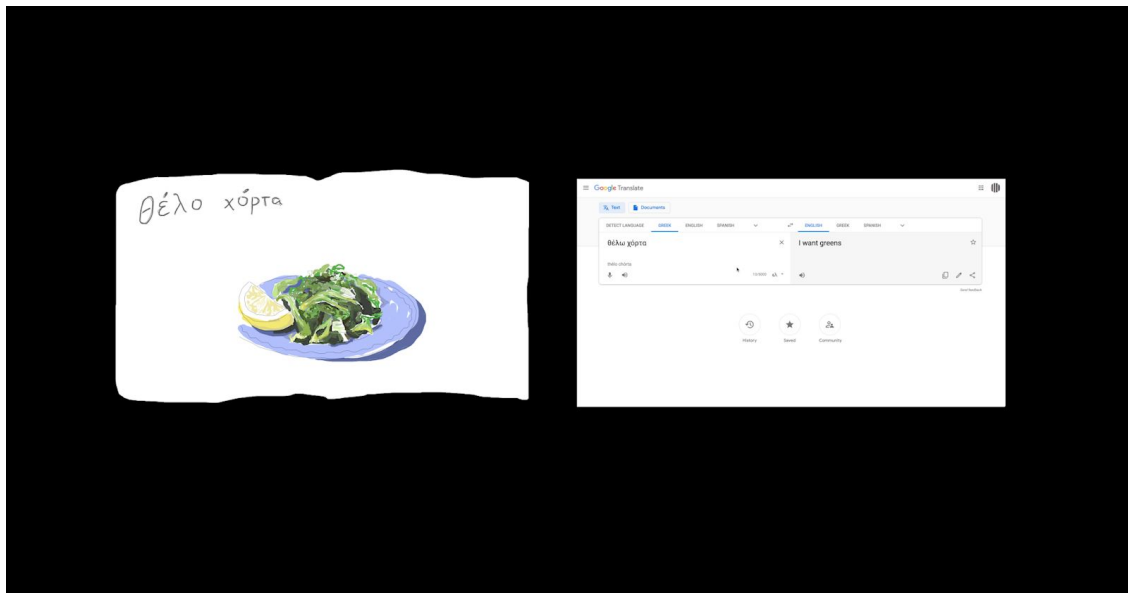


Figure 6. Still from *Taking Inventory*, Digital Animation, 2020

Memory is not only triggered by physical forms such as old photographs and objects, but it can also be activated by nonphysical forms such as smell or sound. In my animation, *Taking Inventory* (Fig. 6), I was inspired by the ability of sound, particularly the sound of spoken language, to serve as a record of my childhood and Greek-American identity. Growing up, I was taught many Greek words and short phrases by my parents. Unfortunately my learning never progressed beyond the age of ten, so the words that I can speak are remembered from my childhood. With the limited words I do know, I do not know how to spell them using Greek characters. To me, these words exist only as sounds produced by speaking. It is funny and sad, because as an adult, I have a child's vocabulary.

According to author Roger Shattuck, “To see anything in temporal depth we need at least two impressions of it.”¹⁷ *Taking Inventory* is organized in a way that addresses two impressions of the same subject: both my initial cognition (which occurred in the past), as well as recalled cognition (which brings the past into the present). The screen is divided into two separate spaces. On the left side is a digital book which represents my childhood. On the right side is a screen recording of Google Translate, which represents present day. The animation begins with my speaking a Greek word into Google Translate. When the English translation is given and spoken by the computer, a moving illustration and writing of that word appears on the book. The book’s page then turns and the process is repeated for the following word.

Conclusion - Future representations of memory

I am becoming increasingly reliant on digital means to preserve memory. All of the Greek words which I speak into Google Translate are saved in a digital word bank for me to refer back to (see Fig. 7). On that same note, all of the photos I take are stored in Google Photos, and become part of the digital cloud. I often receive prompts from Google to “check out this memory from X years ago”. All of my memories exist digitally now, which is why I am so drawn to the aura of old photographs: it is a physical object, something I can hold in my hand. The digital file is extremely reproducible because it can be shared instantaneously, across the globe, to infinity. In this sense there is no original, because the complication of memory is inherent within the digital file.

¹⁷Roger Shattuck, “Proust’s Binoculars (1964),” In *Memory*, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012, 32

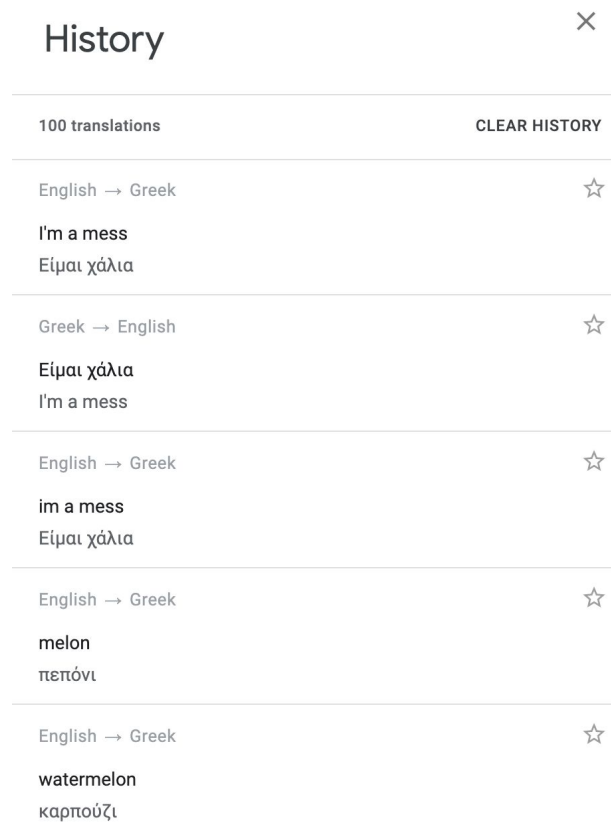


Figure 7. Screen capture of Google Translate History

What is the point of reproduction, digital or analogue? Can painting act as a source of remembrance, and a preserver of memory? Michael Newman describes the distinction between analogue and digital reproduction, “The analogue medium is robust yet vulnerable to change, liable to decay or wear out, as the groove of a vinyl record loses some of its subtle variations with each play [...] Digital reproduction is always imperfect - it involves compression and loss - but takes place within a horizon of perfectibility.”¹⁸ The way we interact with a painting, for example, versus a digital file is different. Paintings exist in the physical realm and can easily be

¹⁸ Michael Newman, “Analogue, Chance and Memory (2011),” In *Memory*, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012, 111

seen, but digital files cannot be accessed in the physical realm unless we actively search for them on an electronic device. I argue that, despite technological advances, there will always be an *aura*¹⁹ connected to an object, physical or digital, something that sets it apart, and activates an individual experience.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

List of Figures

Figure 1. *'61 Pontiac*, Robert Bechtle, 1968 - 1969, $59 \frac{4}{5} \times 84 \frac{3}{10}$ in, Oil On Canvas

Figure 2. *At Home* , 2020, [2] 16 x 20 in, oil on canvas

Figure 3. *Hide and Seek*, 2018, [2] 16 x 20 in, Oil on Canvas Pad

Figure 4. *Trigger*, 2020, 29" x 36", Oil on Canvas

Figure 5. Detail of *Trigger*

Figure 6. Still from *Taking Inventory*, Digital Animation, 2020

Figure 7. Screen capture of Google Translate History

Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. Reprint edition. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.
- Bäuml, Karl-Heinz T., and Anuscheh Samenieh. "The Two Faces of Memory Retrieval." *Psychological Science* 21, no. 6 (2010): 793–95.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1996.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Burger, Jerry M., Joy Hornisher, Valerie E. Martin, Gary Newman, and Summer Pringle. "The Pique Technique: Overcoming Mindlessness or Shifting Heuristics?" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 37, no. 9 (September 2007): 2086–96.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2007.00252.x>.
- Foster, Hal. "Outmoded Spaces (1993)." In *Memory, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Edited by Ian Farr, 49-59. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. "Memory Images (1927)." In *Memory, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Edited by Ian Farr, 45-46. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. Verso, 2002.
- Newman, Michael. "Analogue, Chance and Memory (2011)." In *Memory, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Edited by Ian Farr, 109-111. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012.
- SFMOMA. *Robert Bechtle: The camera is a sketchbook*. Accessed May 1, 2020.
<https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/robert-bechtle-the-camera-is-a-sketchbook/>.
- Shattuck, Roger. "Proust's Binoculars (1964)." In *Memory, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Edited by Ian Farr, 30-40. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012.
- The Interaction Design Foundation. "What Are Gestalt Principles?" Accessed May 1, 2020.
<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/gestalt-principles>.
- Zajonc, R. B. "Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal." *Current Directions in*

Psychological Science 10, no. 6 (2001): 224–28.